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BOOK REVIEWS

The Basis of Putin's Eurasianism

MARIAN K. LEIGHTON

Charles Clover: *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2016, 360 p., $35.

Why Charles Clover, an award-winning journalist and a former Moscow bureau chief for London's *Financial Times,* chose such an unusual title for his book is grounds for speculation. A plausible explanation lies in the metaphor of an ill wind blowing across the Russian lands and disfiguring the pristine landscape. That ill wind takes the political form of a hardline nationalism that, according to Clover, has evolved from a peculiar Eurasian philosophy that flourished in the early 20th century and was temporarily eclipsed by Marxist-Leninist ideology during the Soviet period, only to re-emerge under the rule of President Vladimir V. Putin.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

Clover's narrative begins with the writings of White Russian exiles who

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migrated to Europe in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, but the concept of Russia as a Eurasian power has historic antecedents dating back many centuries. The Mongol successors of Genghis Khan conquered Kievan Rus, the cradle of Russian civilization, in 1239 and subsequently extended their dominion (known as the Golden Horde) over all the Russian lands. Although Tsar Ivan III defeated the Mongol forces in the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380, most of Russia remained under the Tatar Yoke for another century. The Mongol Empire at its height was virtually coterminous with the territory of the Communist bloc during the Cold War; it extended from China and North Korea all the way to Eastern Europe.

Geographically, Russia, which straddles two continents, is quintessentially Eurasian. Its position astride the geographical and cultural divide between East and West has played a major role in the struggle to define its national identity. Was it European, Asian, or something *sui generis*?

Both tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union harbored a deep-seated love-hate view of the West. Although part of Russia belonged geographically to Europe, it was culturally and politically closer to Asia because of powerful Byzantine and Mongol-Tartar influences and was isolated from Europe for long periods of its history, particularly during the two-centuries-long Tatar Yoke. Ambrose Bierce, author of *The Devil's Dictionary*, defined a Russian as "a person with a Caucasian body and a Mongolian soul."[1] Or, according to the French maxim, "*Grattez un Russe et vous trouverez un Tartare* ("Scratch a Russian and you will find a Tatar"). Some historians, including Harvard's Richard Pipes, evoked the image of Russia as an Oriental despotism. George F. Kennan has written that

> Many of the characteristic features of Soviet attitudes (the strong instinct for orthodoxy, the claim to political infallibility and a monopoly of ideological or religious truth, messianic dreams of world ascendancy, an exaggerated sense of prestige, a morbid suspiciousness toward outside powers, a determination to isolate the Russian people from contacts with the West, etc.) were characteristics of pre-Petrine Russia.[2]

A pervasive xenophobia, spawned in part by foreign invasions, was combined with admiration for Western technology. Both tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union craved the fruits of Western scientific and material progress without their political, social, and cultural accoutrements. As far back as the reign of Peter the Great in the early 18th century, Russia sought to partake of Western scientific and technical achievements while keeping Western values and political culture at bay. Peter, who built the city of St. Petersburg in 1703 as a window

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on Europe, visited parts of Western Europe in disguise and imported Dutch shipbuilders and German craftsmen to Russia to teach their skills to the tsar's entourage.[3] Russia's rulers from Peter onward generally sought to restrict contacts with the West to a small, educated minority of the nobility while keeping the vast majority of the population ignorant of and hostile to foreign influences.

A struggle between "Westernizers" (who sought to emulate European liberal, free-market societies) and "Slavophiles" (who fostered an active pan-Slavic movement in the 19th century and advocated a path of development along the lines of Russia's unique cultural and spiritual heritage) was a constant theme of Russian history.

As one journalist earlier noted:

> [C]zarist expansionism followed the path of least resistance, turning eastward and southward, until blocked by Ottoman Turkey, British India, imperial China and the waters of the Pacific. The agents of the czars and the bands of Cossacks that followed them into the mountains of the Caucasus and across the endless steppes of Siberia subjugated, but never quite digested, the tribesmen of Moscow's Wild East. Our Comanches and Apaches were their Tatars and Uzbeks. A hard-riding Cossack named Yermak was the Russian equivalent of Daniel Boone.[4]

The roughly two dozen White Russian exiles—including writers, historians, linguists, composers, and even a priest—who fostered an early version of Eurasianism were oddly inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, which they viewed as "a shedding of slavish Western conformity and the rebirth of authentic Russianness, a Biblical event, a cataclysm" in the aftermath of Europe's self-destruction and civilizational collapse in World War I. In the eyes of these Russian intellectuals, the primitive and brutal nature of the Bolsheviks was reminiscent of the Mongol hordes who had taken over Russia and somehow served as agents of purification.

THE GUMILEV INFLUENCE

Lev Gumilev, the best known and most prolific of the early Eurasianists and the man who popularized the term "Eurasia," wrote fourteen histories about the alleged organic relationship between Russia and the nomadic Turko-Mongolian tribes of the steppe. Gumilev was the son of two of the most famous Russian poets of the 20th century, Anna Akhmatova and Nikolay Gumilev. His writings drew heavily upon the works of the exiled White Russians, especially the publication in 1920 of a book of essays titled *Exodus to the East,* which Clover called "the founding document of the Eurasianist movement." The most famous of its four authors was Prince Nikolay Trubetskoy, a young professor of linguistics from one of

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Russia's most aristocratic families, who narrowly escaped the Bolsheviks by sailing from Ukraine to Turkey on one of the last available ships. *Exodus to the East* had a pseudo-religious tone that rejected Western cultural influences on Russia in favor of a civilizational paradigm encompassing the inner Asian peoples of the Russian Empire. It was an ethno-linguistic as well as a geopolitical paradigm in which Russia played the dominant cultural role.

Gumilev also formulated a theory of "ethnogenesis," which postulated that every branch of humanity identifies with a particular nation or ethnic group. With specific reference to Russia, he argued that the Russians and the peoples of the steppe constituted "an unconscious super ethnos, a natural empire or civilization." But Gumilev failed to anticipate the rise of nationalism among the USSR's multi-ethnic population—a primordial nationalism that played a key role in the empire's disintegration. Clover writes that "Gumilev seems to have done more than anyone to inspire non-Russian nationalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus, with fateful consequences."

Even though Gumilev was confined to the Gulag for two separate periods and was not rehabilitated until after Josef Stalin's death, he retained his belief in an autocratic Russia, developing what Clover calls "a type of Stockholm syndrome." Drawing upon his studies of the steppe tribes of Central Asia, he spawned a theory of "passionarity," a condition in which the Asiatic tribesmen who invaded and plundered vast territories willingly sacrifice themselves for a higher, posthumous honor—somewhat similar to contemporary Islamist martyrdom.

THE RISE OF DUGIN

Gumilev died in 1992, a year after the demise of the Soviet Union, but his concept of Eurasianism lived on and became an integral part of the Kremlin's effort to reassemble the broken pieces of the union and create a new imperial domain. Gumilev's ideological successor was Alexander Dugin, who dabbled in neo-Nazism during his teenage years and rebelled against the stultifying social and intellectual climate of the Soviet Union in the 1970s by joining the underground counterculture with its mystical, occult, and other esoteric elements. In the early 1980s he joined Pamyat, which, according to Clover, "mutated from a gaggle of intelligentsia curiosities into a crypto-fascist street gang—an agglomeration of football hooligans and middle-class aesthetes like Dugin." The KGB began to look favorably upon Pamyat, viewing it as a patriotic movement that championed Russian nationalism at a time when Communist ideology was increasingly discredited.

In 1989 Dugin published two influential books. The first was *The Way of the Absolute*, a series of essays derived from the Orthodox Christian belief that the spiritual authority of the autocratic state entitled it to rule (perhaps recalling the Chinese concept of the "mandate

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of heaven"). The second book was *The Metaphysics of the Gospel*, an esoteric work identifying Russia as the heir to the Byzantine Empire (what others called the "Third Rome") and advocating the restoration of a Byzantine-like entity embodying a synthesis between the Orthodox church and the state. That book also argued that the era of the nation-state was past and that the future belonged to strategic and ethnically distinct areas bound together by a dominant culture. This concept became the theoretical basis for a Eurasian "space" under the sway of Russia.

Clover contends that the proceeds from these two volumes enabled Dugin to fund several trips during the 1990s to Western Europe, where he met with some far-Right spokesmen and imported their ideas into post-Soviet Russia. Central to their outlook was an antipathy to the United States, the sole remaining superpower, and its hegemonic role around the globe.[5]

During a trip to Paris, Dugin met Russian emigré Yury Mamleev, who became his mentor and literary idol. Mamleev, in turn, put Dugin in touch with Alexander Prokhanov, who edited the conservative newspaper *Den (The Day)* and also maintained contacts with members of the Red Army's General Staff. Prokhanov had become one of the leaders of the conservative counterattack against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reform program. He also played a prominent role in forging an alliance between Army officers and Russian nationalists of Dugin's ilk.

Dugin began writing articles with a nationalist and patriotic viewpoint for *Den.* He became known as an effective pamphleteer, propagandist, and public intellectual. After the Soviet Union's collapse, Prokhanov arranged for Dugin to become a lecturer at the Russian Academy of the General Staff. This position offered Dugin a platform for the dissemination of his ideas on Eurasianism.

In 1997 Dugin published his seminal work, *The Foundations of Geopolitics.* He argued, *inter alia,* that the Cold War was not primarily a contest between rival ideologies but rather a struggle between what he termed the "land people" and the "sea people." This formulation mimicked the theory of the famed British geopolitician Sir Halford Mackinder, who postulated a permanent struggle between the "Heartland" (with Russia as the earth's dominant land power) and the "World Island" (the major naval powers, denoting first Great Britain and then the United States). This concept fit neatly with Dugin's philosophy of Eurasianism, which foresaw Russia's distancing (both physical and ideological) from the West and leadership of a Eurasian domain encompassing European Russia and the Asiatic parts of the former Soviet Empire, all coexisting under a Russian cultural umbrella forming a counterweight to Western hegemony.[6] Clover characterizes Eurasianism as "a synthesis of nationalism and internationalism" and defines Eurasia as a "multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, but

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distinctly Russian and … non-Western geopolitical space." Similarly, Leon Aron, a Soviet emigré and scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, has written that Eurasianism's meaning "is intended to evoke something larger than geography: a separate civilization, bound by an almost mystical unity—linguistic, cultural, religious—and profoundly distinct from Europe and its values."[7] Much of the geopolitical space outlined by Clover is inhabited by the Turko–Mongolian tribes of the steppe lands who were historically Russia's deadly foes but now belong to the "super-ethnos" envisioned by the Kremlin.

Within a decade of the publication of *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, Dugin's concept of Eurasianism had entered the Russian mainstream and was embraced by the highest levels of the regime. The book, produced with the help of Russia's Academy of the General Staff, continues to be assigned as a textbook at the Academy and at other military universities in Russia. According to Clover, "Dugin would become the ideologist of the new autocracy."

THE KGB POTENTATE TAKES OVER

Russia's current autocrat, Vladimir Putin, was first elected President in 2000 and served two four-year terms before becoming Prime Minister under his aide-turned-President Dmitri Medvedev. He returned to the presidency after the 2012 election. Putin describes his government as a "managed democracy," but it has little in common with Western-style democratic principles and is rather imbued with a strong sense of nationalism and irredentism.

Putin lamented the demise of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century" and vowed to strengthen Russian nationalism and restore Russia to the status of a superpower occupying the Eurasian heartland and extending its influence beyond the periphery. He began to pepper his pronouncements with the vocabulary of Eurasianism. Shortly after his initial ascension to the presidency in 2000, he issued a set of foreign policy guidelines that, according to Clover, decried a "strengthening tendency towards the formation of a unipolar world under financial and military domination by the United States" and called for a "multipolar world order." He went on to describe Russia's most important attribute as its "geopolitical position as the largest Eurasian state." In November of that year, during a state visit to Kazakhstan, Putin emphasized that "Russia has always perceived itself as a Eurasian country."

Putin has also spoken of the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), a unique and superior civilization. In an article on 23 January 2012 in the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta,* Putin first described Russia as a "civilization state" that is "based on the preservation of Russian cultural dominance, the carriers of which are not only ethnic Russian but all carriers of such identity regardless

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of nationality." He subsequently proposed the creation of a Eurasian Union as "a project for the preservation of identity of peoples, of historical Eurasia in the new century and a new world." Putin's athletic lifestyle and devotion to martial arts also reflect his urge to rule as a Eurasian potentate. His habit of riding bare-chested on horseback, for example, has promoted an image of his virility (and, by definition, Russia's), as well as a symbolic tribute to the Asiatic horsemen of the steppes. Putin's championship of Russian racial purity and Christian faith strike a discordant note, however, especially in view of the majority Muslim population of the former Soviet Union's Central Asian republics.

Dugin was a natural ally for Putin and enjoyed the Kremlin's patronage. He was invited to write op-ed pieces in major newspapers and to appear on television talk shows.

THE FOUNDATION OF RUSSIAN EXPANSIONISM

"Eurasianism" became a rationale and a guide for Russian expansion and irredentism. It also prescribed their trajectory. Since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) presented obstacles to westward expansion—thus eliminating the possibility of reincorporating the western Slavic lands of Poland and the Czech Republic into a new Russian empire—Russia is currently attempting to move along the path of least resistance, i.e., in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

In 2008 Russian forces invaded South Ossetia, a Georgian territory that had resisted absorption into independent post-Soviet Georgia. The military action aimed to punish Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili for his pro-Western policies, particularly for including Georgia in NATO's Partnership for Peace program. The Russians also invaded Abkhazia, another breakaway Georgian province.

Ukraine became the next victim of Russian aggression. Clover contends that Dugin's book *The Foundations of Geopolitics* "laid out the plans for the dismemberment of Ukraine." Moreover, in 2009, Dugin reportedly drew a map of a fractured Ukraine that included the term "*Novorossiya*" ("New Russia") to signify Ukraine's eastern provinces, which eventually broke away from the pro-Western government of Viktor Yushchenko after an armed uprising by Russian-backed separatists in 2014. But Russia's boldest move was the annexation of Crimea, a peninsula that was populated predominantly by ethnic Russians and served as the home port of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, based at Sevastopol. Having sent forces to infiltrate Crimea, the Kremlin engineered a referendum that resulted in its seceding from Ukraine and joining the Russian Federation.

Russia remains on the warpath, most recently in the Middle East, where it has intervened in the Syrian civil war and sought closer relations with Iran and Turkey. Dugin, for his part, was heading a Moscow-based think tank on Eurasian ideas and teaching sociology at Moscow State

University at the time of the publication of Clover's book.

A SURFEIT OF DETAIL AND HISTORY

Black Wind, White Snow is difficult to read, even for students of Russian history like this reviewer. Charles Clover makes numerous references to "Eurasia" and "Eurasianism" throughout the volume, but he fails to discuss coherently the term's origins, content, and use as a rationale for Moscow's power plays. Moreover, he tries to cram a century's worth of Russian political, cultural, and intellectual history into a single volume. Filling the pages are too many characters who are not really relevant to the main narrative, and far too many references are made to people and events that are only vaguely familiar. Only after slogging through some 200 pages can the meat of the book be reached; focused editing could have shortened and sharpened the work and eliminated its many digressions.

Despite these shortcomings, *Black Wind, White Snow* could serve to encourage the pursuit of further study of Russia, which has once again emerged as a key player and powerful antagonist of the United States in the global arena.

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1 Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary, Tales and Memoirs*, first published in 1911. It was reissued by the Library of America in New York in 2011 to commemorate the centennial of the original publication.

2 George F. Kennan, "The Russian Revolution—Fifty Years After: Its Nature and Consequences," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1967, p. 15.

3 Lenin lived in exile for many years in London, Zurich, and other European cities. But in 1918, shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution, he transferred the Soviet capital away from "the window on the West" back to Moscow in the interior of Russia. St. Petersburg had been renamed Petrograd in 1914. Five days after Lenin's death in 1924 it became Leningrad. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the name St. Petersburg was restored.

4 See Smith Hempstone, "Georgia on his mind," *The Washington Times*, 18 April 1989.

5 For a more contemporary analysis of Russian cultural antagonism toward the United States, see Eric Shiraev and Vladislav Zubok, *Anti-Americanism in Russia: From Stalin to Putin* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

6 Similar concepts were popularized by Samuel P. Huntington in his "clash of civilizations."

7 Leon Aron, "The Eurasian Judo Master," *Commentary*, January 2017, p. 38.

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